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MESSAGES *of* COMFORT

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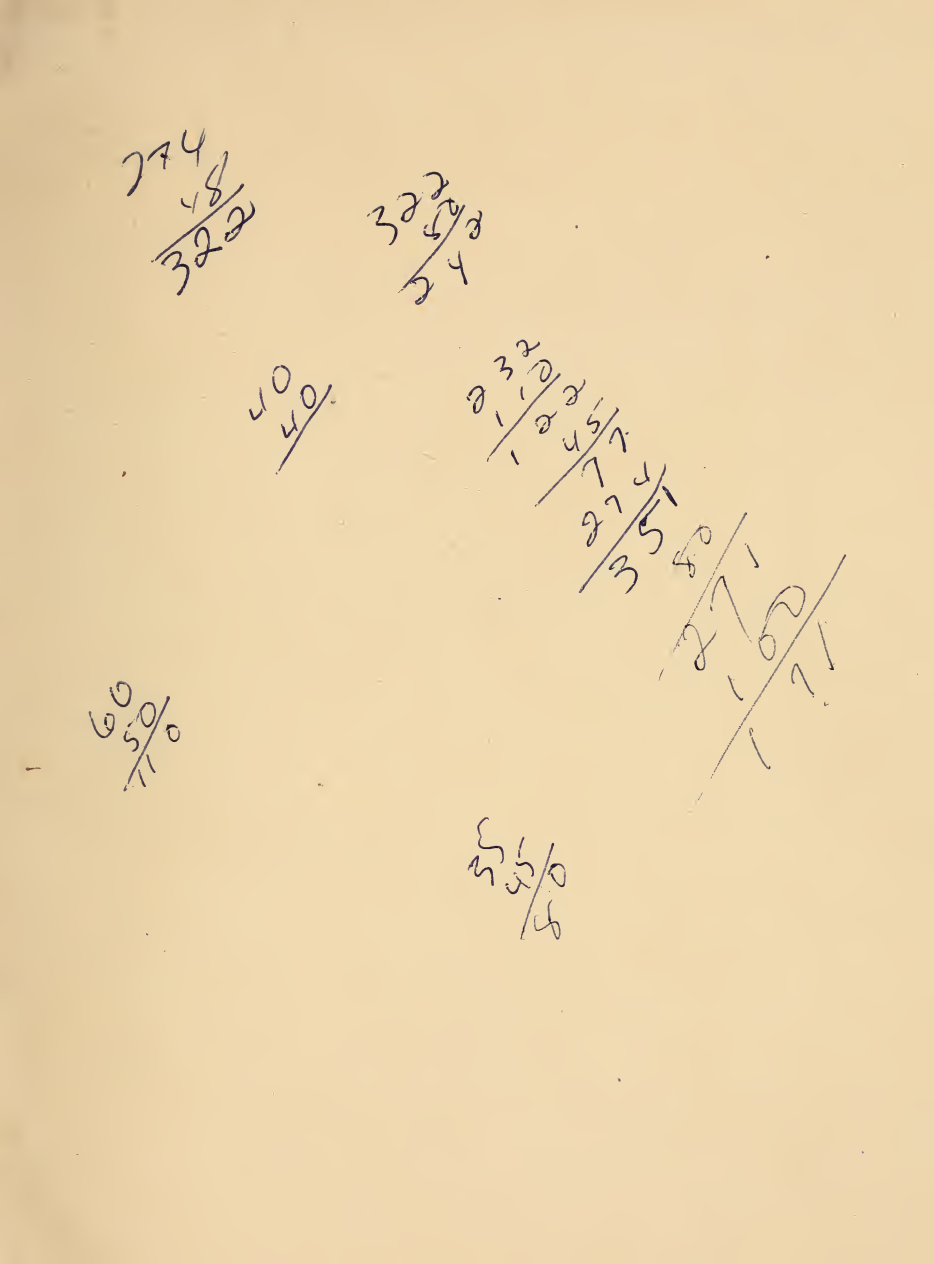

BLESSED be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction, through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. (2 Cor. i. 3, 4.).

E. D. PALMER, SCULPT.

THE ANGEL AT THE SEPULCHRE

He is not here, but is risen. (Luke xxiv. 6.)

MESSAGES *of* COMFORT

BY

MARY NORTH BLAKESLEE

BOSTON
SILVER, BURDETT & COMPANY
221 COLUMBUS AVENUE

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THE groups of angel figures and the picture of Christ in this book are from the very beautiful rose window placed in the Church of the Redeemer, Paterson, N. J., by the late lamented Vice-President Hobart, as a memorial to his only daughter, who died in Milan, Italy. In the window the figure of Christ is in the centre panel, and is surrounded by eight groups of adoring angels, expressive of youth in face and form, and bearing lilies as symbols of purity. This window was designed by Mr. Edward P. Sperry of the Church Glass & Decorating Company of New York, by whom it was built, and by whose kind permission some portions of the design are here used.

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WAYSIDE DEPARTMENT OF THE
UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE, U.S.A.

THE FIRST EASTER MORNING

We sit beside the lower feast to-day;
She at the higher.
Our voices falter as we bend to pray;
In the great choir
Of happy saints she sings, and does not tire.

Susan Coolidge.

TO a beloved daughter, whose earthly life was a benediction of comfort to all who knew her, and whose blessed memory is a continual message of peace.

M. N. B.

Easter, 1901.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. (Matt. v. 4.)

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The Longed-for Message

We miss her in the place of prayer,
And by the hearth-fire's light;
We pause beside her door to hear
Once more her sweet "Good-night!"

Fold her, O Father! in thine arms,
And let her henceforth be
A messenger of love between
Our human hearts and thee.

John Greenleaf Whittier.

The Longed-for Message

IN the beautiful story of the child Samuel and the voice that spoke to him at evening, it is said, by way of preface, "In those days there was no open vision." But the child was obedient to the words that came to him out of the darkness as he lay upon his couch near the holy things in the great tent where the people worshipped. In like manner comes the voice to-day, though there is no sight nor sound. There was a household — and alas! it is not the only one — upon which the shadow of a great sorrow had fallen. The one to whom all the others had looked for grace and comfort had passed away into the silence. She had always seen what each one needed, whether it was the word of

cheer or the quick help of word or deed. If any one bore a heavy burden — and in that household there were those who were sometimes overburdened — to her they instinctively turned, for her bright spirit could share the anxiety without any dimming of its own happiness. She did all this so quietly that often one did not notice anything but the comfort and relief which her presence brought. Now all that was gone, and in its place nothing was left but the dull, familiar pain,

> "And weariful attempts to guess
> The secret of the hiding skies,
> The soft, inexorable blue."

They had laid her out of their sight, on a quiet hillside sloping gently toward the sunrising, and each evening, as her mother looked out upon the night, she thought of that quiet place and of the lonely sleeper. She knew her loved one was not there, and as she looked up at the silent stars wheeling overhead in their mysterious circles,

there seemed to be a message in their shining which she struggled in vain to read. "Where in the heavenly spaces is now that beautiful soul?" she asked. "If I could only know a little where she is. Her life cannot be quenched entirely. God could not be the God we think He is, if He could so waste that which is so infinitely precious." The mother's faith was firm and steady, yet she longed with a great longing to hear the dear voice say, "I am somewhere, and it is well with me."

One evening, quite by accident, she met a woman who had been bereaved, and who had found, as she most confidently believed, great comfort from the visible form and actual touch of the beloved one. There was not a suggestion in her speech of the vulgar juggling which has made the name of spiritual communication a hissing and a by-word. You hoped it was with her as she said, for it seemed as if it might be, to one like her; yet, as she talked of it, the mother's

heart felt the strong desire for the visible presence slacken. Not for worlds would she call back her dear one, to demean herself to this world's lower needs, as if a prince should leave the delights of his palace, and hiding himself in cloak and hood be jostled in the highways by the unmindful crowd.

"If God *could* let her come and speak to me some day, if but for one short moment — but I dare not ask it; how can we understand what limitations of space shut around us on this dim earth? — but why may I not ask for her dear invisible presence with me, not her sweet memory only?"

The mother has never seen the shadows of her room shape themselves into the misty form. She never wakes to see "the happy face and tranquil eyes" looking down upon her in the dim morning hours from beside her bed, as she once dreamed she might. But in that household a sweet influence abides, like that which broods over the earth

in the quiet autumn woods on All Saints' Day, when we are ready to believe with those who say, "The blessed dead are with us, for the calm on earth and sky accord with their actual presence." In that home care whitens the hair, perplexity furrows the smooth foreheads, youth slowly grows to earnest manhood. There are sorrows there as elsewhere, but there is also a comfort and a peace not of earth. The quick, impatient word dies upon the lips unspoken. The little taunt drops unnoticed, the burden of sorrow is borne uncomplainingly by each one, lest an added sorrow should lie athwart the pathways of the others. For her sweet sake those who are left try to keep on bravely and cheerfully with the daily round of living. The sunshine falls upon the rooms in which her dear memory is still fragrant. There are cheerful good-morning greetings, and tender good-evening farewells. When, in the "mid-silence of the voiceless night," the sense of loss and loneliness

presses keenest, and out of the darkness the soul cries out for the beloved presence, whence comes that healing touch, that sense of the hearing ear, though without voice of response, that relaxing of the tense nerves, that peaceful sleep?

If we were but in perfect tune, as are telegraphic instruments in high towers, keyed to receive messages from other instruments miles away, might not influences strong, sweet, and helpful touch us from out the "vast secret distances," even as sun calls to planet, and star to star across spaces too great for earthly measuring lines.

There is no open vision. Some day when eyes grow clearer and souls are refined from earthly clinging thoughts, there *may* come the audible voice and the visible form. Till then let us listen to what we have, and open our hearts to the silent whisper.

The Unrecognized Message

It lies around us like a cloud,
The world we do not see;
Yet the sweet closing of an eye
May bring us there to be.

Its gentle breezes fan our cheek
Amid our earthly cares;
Its gentle voices whisper love,
And mingle with our prayers.

Sweet hearts around us throb and beat,
Sweet helping hands are stirred,
And palpitates the veil between,
With breathings almost heard.

Sweet souls around us, watch us still,
Press nearer to our side;
Into our thoughts, into our prayers,
With gentle helping glide.

Harriet Beecher Stowe.

The Unrecognized Message

ONE beautiful afternoon two women, mother and daughter, stepped out on a terrace commanding a wide view of the sea. Little paths ran here and there from the cliffs to the rocks and to beaches far below. The two women had been in the shadow of a great sorrow, and had come out from their darkened home for a few hours' diversion, to try to store up from the crisp air and cheerful sunshine courage to help them through the lonely days. Their plan had been that the older woman should sit quietly on the piazza, while the daughter rambled about for an hour on the cliffs.

"It is so lovely and so high here," said the mother, "that you can see it all just as well as to go scrambling about down there."

But the other, fond from her youth of the woods and fields, longed for a closer view. "I will not be long away. You can see me almost all the time." And settling her mother comfortably where the beautiful panorama was spread out before her, she stepped lightly down the path.

It wound between little clumps of cedar and juniper, it dipped between great rocks to where the sea broke in green water and white foam. Beside the path great purple asters lighted up rock crevices. Rose hips glowed like carbuncles in the sunlight, pale olive juniper berries clustered on low bushes, and the bayberries hid under fragrant leaves. Wherever she stepped her eye met something beautiful. As the path wound in and out she could see the quiet figure on the piazza and at times waved her hand to her, half wondering that there was no response, but thinking, "She can see me come and go and will understand how much all this means to me."

At last the path came out at the top of the cliff. As she stood in relief against the sky, she looked back at the piazza. "She can surely see me here," she thought. A trail led down to a shingly beach, but she forbore to go, for she thought, "It will take me out of her sight, and the time will seem long to her." So half reluctantly she retraced her steps and soon rejoined her mother, bringing back treasures gathered for her by the way.

"Did the time seem long, dear?" she asked.

"Not very," hesitated she, with sweet unselfishness, but the tone showed that the waiting had not been like the happy rambling.

"Did n't you see me wave my hand to you?"

"No," was the answer.

"Could n't you see me against the sky, when I stood on the cliff yonder?"

"No, I could not see well enough to distinguish you from the other people."

Night brought a return to their city home. As the younger woman laid her head upon her pillow, her sorrow pressed upon her all the more heavily for the temporary relief of the afternoon, and she longed for the loved one who had passed beyond her sight.

Then the thought came to her: "How different to-day it was for mother, waiting alone upon the piazza, from what it was for me, enjoying those things I dearly love. She could not see or hear me, yet I was conscious all the while of her, and watching the time when I should return to her and we go home together. Can it be that this is symbolic? She whom I mourn is wandering among delights which I can only imagine, as mother could not share my happy little walk. But my absent one may be conscious of me, she may even try to signal to me, but my earth-blind eyes are too dim to see. She may be gathering for me sweet heavenly thoughts, as I did the

flowers and berries for mother to-day. Though I cannot see her, she is there, and across the distance she may know of me and my quiet waiting for her. Mother would not have kept me from that happy hour on the cliffs because she was not strong enough to go with me; shall I grieve that my dear one wanders in the joyful heavenly fields, where my feet are not yet permitted to go? Is not this a message sent to strengthen my sad waiting heart through the lonely days that must come till she comes for me and we go home together?"

This thought was full of comfort, and her sorrowful heart found rest.

Upward I turn my weary blinded eyes,
And strive to search through all the spaces wide
Where doth — I cry unto the silent skies —
The little sister now abide!

Oh, Father! Wheresoever she may be —
Whether amid the starry spheres above,
Or in some world no human eye can see —
Guard and surround her with Thy love.

C. A. M. Webb.

The Message *of the* Evening Star

ANOTHER hand is beckoning us,
Another call is given;
And glows once more with Angel-steps
The path that reaches Heaven.

John Greenleaf Whittier.

The Message *of the* Evening Star

GRIEF has many phases. There are times when a blessed powerlessness to feel comes over the sorrowing one, and he says in surprise, "Can it be that I am comforted so soon? Is this my loyalty to the dead?" Then a word, a look, something unseen or unthought of, unlocks the barred-up gates of feeling, and like a flood the old sorrow sweeps over us, with its "black and icy wave." Hope is gone, faith is but a shadow to which we cling because we do not dare to let it go, but it is only a shadow, and does not hold us up.

In such a mood as this, one winter twilight, a woman deeply bereaved hurried from her house, where she had been vainly struggling

for peace and submission. "Why should a life like hers I loved, which always brought healing and strength to sorrow and weakness, — a life so needed here, — be quenched in darkness when so many useless lives are left to drag upon brave souls and keep them down? Does God know what He is doing, when He burdens so those who are trying to serve Him? It is such an awful waste to take one so young and so ready and able to help this poor sorrowful old world bear its burden of sin and misery. Can it be that the next life, if there is any, will be only this same old story of cruel limitation and hopeless struggle, or else dark extinction? Was that beautiful life we all loved so much put out as we blow out a candle? If not, then *where is she?* Oh, if I could only know a little about her, and what she is doing? Why could I not be told, if there was anything to tell?" Every nerve and fibre in her being rebelled and cried out as these thoughts surged

through her brain, and would not be argued or prayed down. And with them came those gloomy forebodings of still heavier calamities which always haunt those who walk in shadowed pathways. The winter twilight was shutting down, a quiet night was coming on. As she walked slowly on, too full of thought to notice much about her, she turned to one side, where the pretty suburban street wound around the hill, to where a wide expanse of sky opened toward the west. There, calmly clear and luminous, shone down the evening star. A thrill shot through and through her as she looked up almost startled. It seemed in some way as if a message trembled there for her. She could not read it in words, or even make it clear to her thought, but vaguely it spoke of the hand that hung and kept it there, of great world-forces working smoothly and in infinite silence, of mysterious intelligences that respond to still more mysterious laws yet unread. It seemed as if the star was

trying to telegraph to her, but she could not understand the cipher. The tension of her mood relaxed, faith and hope swept back as the tide turns and sweeps back into the empty desolate pools and fills the whole shore with life and gladness. Once more she could see that

> "God *is* in His heaven
> And all's well with the world."

Again and again, as the evening star has lit its lamp, has this mysterious message thrilled her. And not her alone. See how again and again, in song and story, the star has brought an inscrutable message which no one quite interprets.

> "As I came down along the height
> I saw the evening star,
> Benignant, near, the nearest lamp
> Among the worlds afar.
> Oh, kindly close it looked on me.
> To keep a lone child company
> With all love-looks that are!
> . . . . . .
> Some kinship here I cannot read
> Because it lies too deep!"

How the child in Dickens' sweetest story, "The Child and the Star," dreams of his lost playmate and the star, linking them together mysteriously in his thoughts, "when the star made long rays down toward him, as he saw it through his tears. Now these rays were so bright, and they seemed to make such a shining way from earth to heaven, that when the child went to his solitary bed, he dreamed about the star. . . . He saw a train of people taken up that sparkling road by angels. And the star opening showed him a great world of light. . . . From that time forth the child looked out upon the star as on the home he was to go to, when his time should come; and he thought that he did not belong to the earth alone, but to the star too, because of his sister's angel gone before."

How Matthew Arnold's strong voice in "Rugby Chapel" calls to mind his noble father and his great life! Here is still the same thought in the "far-shining sphere," though more subtly veiled: —

" Oh, strong soul, by what shore
Tarriest thou now? For that force
Surely has not been left vain!
Somewhere, surely, afar,
In the sounding labor-house vast
Of being, is practised that strength,
Zealous, beneficent, firm!

" Yes, in some far-shining sphere,
Conscious or not of the past,
Still thou performest the word
Of the spirit in whom thou dost live, —
Prompt, unwearied, as here!
Still thou upraisest with zeal
The humble good from the ground,
Sternly repressest the bad! "

Can it be that the evening star holds this secret for us? It is a neighbor world, not far away as interstellar spaces go. Our little earth feels its mysterious tug, as it sways in its orbit obedient to its pull. It is a world like ours in many ways, with all the dear familiar night and day — even its starry sky cannot be totally unlike — can it be that " There, oh, there is that land "?

Unprofitable speculations, say we all. Yet our hearts break with the silence. The empty hands stretch out towards the heavens, and "no white wings downward fly!"

A home implies the wontedness and sacredness of a place all our own, and to which we belong. Even a heavenly home would be incomplete without a place of abode, a mansion prepared and suitable for us. Why not let us take the message of the evening star, and let its clear shining speak to us of the beauty and peace of a real place somewhere which enfolds these parted loves of ours? This inscrutable pull upon our heart-strings, this vague peace and comfort may be the call of soul to soul across the far heavenly spaces.

"Star to star vibrates light; may soul to soul
Strike through a finer element of her own?
So — from afar — touch us at once?"

"Across the awful spaces
The greeting of a soul we send!"

The Message *of* Faith

Still on the lips of all we question
The finger of God's silence lies;
Will the lost hands in ours be folded?
Will the shut eyelids ever rise?

O friends! no proof beyond this yearning,
This outreach of our hearts, we need;
God will not mock the hope He giveth,
No love He prompts shall vainly plead.

Then let us stretch our hands in darkness,
And call our loved ones o'er and o'er;
Some day their arms shall close about us,
And the old voices speak once more.

John Greenleaf Whittier.

The Message of Faith

NOT many days ago, a company of sorrowing friends gathered to bid a last good-by to one greatly beloved. The sunlight poured through the windows, touching and lighting up masses of beautiful flowers, heaped wherever they could be placed. Great sheaves of Easter lilies, pink half-open roses, lilies of the valley, and rich purple clusters of heliotrope filled the air with their delicate fragrance. Lying among the flowers was a sweet face, worn with the marks of suffering, but calm with an ineffable peace.

The silence was gently broken by the sweet tones of a few clear voices, softly singing words of perfect trust, —

"In heavenly love abiding,
No change my heart shall fear,
And safe is such confiding,
For nothing changes here:
The storm may roar without me,
My heart may low be laid,
But God is round about me,
And can I be dismayed?"

As the singing ceased, another voice, vibrating with deep yet controlled emotion, spoke those words which have comforted so many hearts bowed down before the mystery of death, — "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord." As the voice went on, a great peace fell upon the quiet company. The tears still gathered; the sorrow was not lifted, but with it came the sweetness of hope. The words were true. They were not idle tales. "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying." The voice went on in words of prayer, — the prayer which is like talking face to face with a loving friend who knows our deepest needs and

longs to give us help. Unto Him these stricken ones gave their sorrow, and His answer was peace. All is well with her, all is well that comes to us from Him. We will wait in hope till the morning dawns, and the shadows flee away.

Then with strong and gentle hands the peaceful face was covered from sight, and gently borne out into the sunshine, with the little company silently following to the quiet hillside resting-place, made ready for those whom we call dead, but whom God calls living. The bright autumn sunlight fell upon them. The air was full of calm. It seemed almost as if another little company, unseen and gracious, was bending above them, in whose care they might leave that dear one when they turned away.

Here another voice, in calm and sympathetic tones, spoke those words that for centuries have hushed the mourners' sobs, — "I am the resurrection, and the life." Then loving hands of those nearest and dearest silently

dropped flowers upon the flower-covered coffin, — the last kindness that they could do for her, whose whole life had been one loving service for them.

Slowly and reluctantly we turned and left her there. Even the flowers that hid the grave's mouth could not conceal the cruel fact. Of the beautiful life, nothing was now left but a beautiful memory.

But if that is true, whence came that strange peace and trust? How could those who had loved her, and before whom she had gone in and out for years, lose that gracious presence, and yet keep that look of hope upon their faces?

Her life had been a beautifully quiet one, full of the sweet ministries of home. Wherever her life touched other lives, she made them purer and happier. The loveliness of her character had diffused itself as the subtle fragrance of violets fills the woodland spaces.

What will sustain these friends through the weary days to come, when the sense of loss

L. of C.

grows deeper and deeper, as she comes not back again, as she used to do after a brief absence? The burdened days will have a hidden spring of strength. A peace which the world cannot understand will gather them under its wings. The Christian's faith, so intangible to those who have it not, so present and real to those who possess it, will uplift and comfort them.

The beautiful memory of that life will be a constant joy and inspiration, and who knows, perhaps even more than that, — a blessed presence abiding in that household, as though she still was nearer than they thought. In the darkness of the night hour mysterious help will come. Even the night shall be light about them. Such a life has not stopped. It is going on somewhere, pure, gracious, real. They shall find it again and be blessed by it.

Centuries ago, to a little group of tearful, startled women, clinging to each other beside a tomb in a garden, an angel spoke strong

words of hope. "Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen." The angel's message of comfort has echoed in the Christian heart ever since.

We make beautiful the quiet resting-places of our dear ones, because our hearts yearn to do some little loving service for them, but we know that they are not there. With St. John the Divine we have had glimpses of that other life. Its glories rise before us in the vision of the Golden City with its gates of pearl. We hear the voices, like the sound of many waters, of the numberless multitudes from earth who dwell therein. We get hints of their unceasing joy in serving God "day and night in his temple," and of their blessed companionship with Him who dwells among them, and whose face they see.

These are visions, indeed, but our faith has another resting-place. In the clear voice of Him who lived in the eternal glory with the Father before the world was, and so knew

whereof He spake, these beatific visions give place to divine promises. We no longer grope in darkness, but dwell in light. "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." This is enough. It includes all that we crave. Our faith in Him answers our deepest longing. Its message leaves no room for doubt. Our loved ones are with Christ. They have but reached home before us.

"And we shall find once more, beyond earth's sorrows,
Beyond these skies,
In the fair city of the 'sure foundations,'
Those heavenly eyes,
With the same welcome shining through their sweetness,
That met us here;
Eyes from whose beauty God has banished weeping
And wiped away the tear."

PEACE I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. (John xiv. 27.)

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